

Rethinking "Acquisition Experience" for Program Manager Certification

Jan Kinner

You have been tasked to assign someone as the program manager (PM) of a weapon system major defense acquisition program (MDAP) that is transitioning from the Technology Development (TD) Phase to the Engineering and Manufacturing Development (EMD) Phase. All the candidates meet all the statutory and regulatory requirements to be assigned as a PM of an MDAP. Each has an impeccable record and is recognized as an accomplished acquisition professional. Each has one or more graduate degrees, has graduated from the Defense Acquisition University's Program Manager's Course, is a member of the Acquisition Corps, and has held an acquisition Key Leadership Position (KLP). They only differ in the amount of acquisition experience they have. Based on this information, which candidate would you choose for this important job?

Kinner spent 21 years in the Air Force acquisition community in various positions, including system program director of the Electronic Systems Center's Logistics Information Systems Program Office. He has held senior positions at several defense contractors. He is a Program Manager's Course graduate and is Level III certified in Program Management and Information Technology.



- Ed—a PM with 15 years of acquisition experience
- Lisa—a PM with 16 years of acquisition experience
- Eric—a PM with 17 years of acquisition experience
- Ken—a PM with 18 years of acquisition experience

I would pick (and I assume you would, too) Ken, because he has the most acquisition experience. But any of the PMs could have been selected, because the statutory (Section 1735, United States Code 10) and regulatory guidance does not specify what type of acquisition experience one needs; it only specifies 8 years of acquisition experience, at least 2 of which were performed in a program office or similar organization, to be assigned as an MDAP PM, while assignment as a deputy program manager (DPM) of an MDAP requires 6 and 2 years, respectively.

In reality, it is hard to find PMs with experience in each phase of the acquisition life cycle. Instead, PMs usually have 3 or 4 years of acquisition phase experience repeated several times and often not even in the same type of system being acquired (e.g., weapon, information technology, etc.). In this case, Ken's first 8 years of experience were on weapon system programs in the TD Phase, and his last 10 have been with weapon system programs in the Operations and Support (O&S) Phase; he has no weapon system EMD Phase experience.

Reviewing the other candidates' records, you discover Ed's first 12 years were working on weapon system pro-

grams in the O&S Phase and for the last 3 years, he has been working on the Program Executive Officer's staff; he has no EMD Phase experience. Lisa's first 3 years were on a weapon system program in the Production and Development (P&D) Phase, the next 3 years on the PEO's staff, followed by 4 years on an Acquisition Category (ACAT) III weapon system program in the P&D Phase, and the past 6 years on a MDAP weapon system program in the EMD Phase—the last 2 years as the DPM. Eric worked his first 4 years on two ACAT III weapon system programs in the P&D Phase, followed by 6 years on information technology programs in various phases, then 3 years on the headquarters staff, and has worked the last 4 years on the Component Acquisition Executive's staff; he has no weapon system EMD Phase experience. Based on these revelations, would you stick with Ken or go with Ed, Lisa, or Eric?

My pick: Lisa. She has the most experience with weapon system acquisition programs in the EMD Phase and, as such has, been through the EMD school of hard knocks. She has a stack of lessons learned in her toolkit about what works and what doesn't. Lisa, in my opinion, is the best qualified PM for this tough job.



As a professor of the DAU's Program Manager's Course, I have talked to a lot of Kens, Eds, and Erics. They are fantastic PMs; they're smart, competent, and have proven themselves as leaders and managers. But they are nervous and even stressed about being assigned to a weapon system program in a phase or a different type program (e.g., IT) in which they have little or no acquisition experience. Some of their leadership and management experiences will help, but these are no substitutes for program-specific and phase-specific experience.

What is experience? Lots of definitions and even more examples are available from a wide variety of sources. Mark Lumb, in his Naval Postgraduate School thesis, *"An Examination of the Skills, Experience, Training and Education Requirements Needed as a Functional Area 97 Officer in the Army Acquisition Corps,"* wrote:

Experience is the frame of reference gained from actually working in the procurement environment. It consists of all of the endless impressions and intangibles derived from being immersed in the actual environment—as opposed to having it described in the artificial environment of a classroom. Education and training are invaluable, but without a frame of reference to translate them into coherent actions, their effectiveness and value are reduced considerably.

While PMs can relate to the larger Integrated Defense Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Life Cycle Management System, their experiences are often limited to a phase or two. So when they are assigned to a phase or different type of program in which they have no experience, they have general knowledge on what needs to be done, but lack the "endless impressions and intangibles derived from being immersed in the actual environment."

In its 2010 report, "Strong Leadership Is Key to Planning and Executing Stable Weapon Programs," the Government Accountability Office found 16 of the 63 MDAPs reviewed appeared to be stable and on track to meet original cost and schedule projections. Common attributes of the stable programs included strong senior leadership support, disciplined PMs, and solid business plans that were well-executed. The PMs "tended to share key attributes such as experience, leadership continuity, and communication skills that facilitated open and honest decision making." The GAO went on: "Officials from our case study programs indicated that prior experience gives a program manager the knowledge to recognize and mitigate risks, and effectively respond to unanticipated problems that arise."

The phrases "stable and on-track" and "disciplined PMs" aren't found in the GAO's March 2012 annual assessment of selected DoD weapon system acquisitions. The GAO found the total acquisition cost of the 96 programs reviewed has grown by over \$74.4 billion in 1 year. The growth, according to the GAO, can be attributed to factors such as inefficiencies in

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production, quantity changes, and research and development cost growth. There was no mention of PMs as contributing to cost or schedule growth or the lack of program-specific or phase-specific experience as one of the reasons for the cost and schedule growth—even though they are the ones in charge of the program! The only recommendation the GAO made pertaining to PMs is that there should be an alignment of PM tenure to complete the development phase of a program—something the DoD is striving to achieve through the use of tenure and PM agreements.

Many, but not all, of the factors that contribute to cost growth or schedule slips are outside the control of the PM—no matter how much experience he or she has. But how much is attributable to a PM assigned to a system with which he has no experience and a phase in which he has no experience? We probably will never know, but it certainly would be an interesting research project to see if there is a positive correlation between a program's cost growth and the program type and/or the phase-specific experience level of the PM.


While changes, in response to statutory requirements, evolving and new technologies, mission requirements, and Service's needs, continue to be made to the training requirements for PMs (e.g., the addition BCF 103, *Fundamentals of Business Financial Management* to the PM Level III core requirements) there have been no changes made to the experience standards required to be certified as a PM Level III or assigned as an ACAT I/IA, II PM or DPM, since such standards were mandated in statute and policy.

Today the Kens, Eds, and Erics receive "acquisition experience" credit if the position they occupied or are occupying includes

acquisition duties and responsibilities defined in the Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics (AT&L) Workforce Position Category Description (PCD). The PCD defines *general acquisition related duties* as “the conceptualization, initiation, design, development, test, contracting, production, deployment, logistical support, modification, and disposal of weapons and other systems, supplies, or services (including construction) to satisfy DoD needs, intended for use in, or in support of, military missions.” It also defines AT&L career field/path *specific duties*: “Manage a defense acquisition program. Responsibilities may be broad (e.g., PM, DPM, or PEO) or focused (e.g., Assistant PM for a particular function), and may be line or staff in nature. Execute duties guided by DoDD 5000.01, DoDI 5000.02, DoD Issuances governing acquisition programs in the DoD Components, and other program management policies addressed in DoD 5000 and 8000 series. Not covered in this category are basic research programs.” Based on this, a person can meet the statutory requirements for acquisition experience and be assigned as an MDAP PM of any type of program and a program in any phase of the acquisition life cycle, even though they have never worked on that type of program or the program is entering a phase in which they have little or no phase-specific experience.

The authors of the 2009 *OSD Study of Program Manager Training and Experience* recommended that “OSD and the Services develop program manager career track designations or specialty codes based on the acquisition framework itself: the type of program assigned, e.g., weapon systems, services, information technology, etc.” They suggested a PM assigned to a weapon system program in the TD Phase receive, in addition to general basic acquisition skills, phase-specific training and be awarded an occupational code indicating weapon systems/technology development that would make the PM qualified to work on other TD Phase weapon system programs.

By following this recommendation, offered 3 years ago, the Kens, Eds, Erics, Marys, and Lindas, assuming they possess the requisite leadership and management skills, will have the needed knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience to increase their chances and the program’s chances of success when assigned to a major program.

According to the April 2010 *Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Strategy* (Appendix 5), “Management of all aspects of DoD acquisition receives the highest level of congressional and DoD senior leader attention. Acquisition outcomes represent a major national investment and are critical to supporting national military strategy. DoD acquisition program managers carry a heavy burden of responsibility and a high degree of accountability for reaching successful acquisition outcomes.” Isn’t it time we started to certify PM by type of program and phase experience? Doing so will be one step in the right direction for improving acquisition outcomes. 

The author can be reached at jan.kinner@dau.mil.

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